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ABSTRACT

The public's reasons for encouraging the competency testing of teachers are discussed, as well as arguments against teacher testing. Testing activities or considered legislation in Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, Arkansas, Virginia, Iowa, Oklahoma, Arizona, Wisconsin, and New York are briefly outlined; as are local district activities in Pinellas County, Florida; Austin and Dallas, Texas; Torrington, Connecticut; Mobile, Alabama; Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties, Maryland; Emporia, Kansas; Richmond, Virginia; New York and Buffalo, New York; Chicago, Illinois; and Salem, Oregon. Two major arguments in support of teacher competency testing are explored: the signs that significant numbers of teachers are incompetent; and the failure of current teacher education, certification, selection, and evaluation procedures to solve these problems. Problems associated with testing are also discussed: (1) uncertainty exists as to which criteria validly measure teacher competence teacher competence; (2) tests can only screen out the very worst teachers; human judgments are still required; and (3) tests may not legally discriminate against teacher applicants. It is concluded that teacher testing may be part of a solution to current problems, if testing is improved in conjunction with certain changes in teacher education and educational administration. (GDC)

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TESTING TEACHERS TO ENSURE COMPETENCY:

THE STATE OF THE ART

American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting

April 1980 - Boston

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970's at least 36 states and many local districts responded to citizen alarm over evidence of declining student test scores and reports of increasing numbers of illiterate high school graduates by creating measures of competency for their elementary and secondary students (Hathaway, 1978, 1980). Now, as we enter the 1980's, a growing number of state legislatures and state and local school systems are responding to the public's belief that some teachers lack minimum levels of competency by turning to tests for teachers as the next logical step in their efforts to improve their children's education. This press for holding teachers to higher standards by means of tests is coming at a time when a steady decline in the student population and the continued large numbers of teachers being produced is creating a growing surplus of teacher candidates. Some school systems are even facing reductions in their current teaching staff. Thus, the public recognizes that those charged with certifying and hiring teachers can afford to set higher standards; and this is what they are demanding as their concern grows that some candidates for employment as teachers and even some practicing teachers may not be minimally competent to teach.

Setting standards for teachers, as well as for students, and gathering evidence about the degree to which the standards have been met is not new to education. The current development is remarkable, however, in two respects: first, the haste with which the evidence that there may be some teachers who lack a minimum level of some forms of teaching competency has been converted into a belief that there is a prevalent problem of incompetence within the teaching force; and, second, the rush to use tests to solve the problem. It is not surprising therefore that this latest movement to ensure the competency of teachers by testing is viewed by various participants and observers of American education as anything from the search for the Holy Grail to another fool's errand.

Governor George Busbee of Alabama in his state-of-the-state address this year strongly favored tests for teachers when he said:

> We have realized that we will never have quality education unless we have quality teachers. We also recognize the fact that we cannot have quality teachers without quality pay to attract new teachers and keep them more than three or four years. But I submit to you that unless we have adequate assessment of the quality of teachers entering the system and require all teachers to both pass the criterion-referenced test and satisfactorily demonstrate good teaching skills on the job...we will have failed.[1]

A recent editorial in The Washington Post comprehensively stated a representative case for testing teachers from the public's point of view when it said:

> In the (Washington, D.C.) District, public school teachers have been hired for years just on the basis of their college records and interviews. Most are graduates of (a local) teacher's college, which in 1977 permitted two students to graduate even though they had failed basic math courses. One of the graduates could not add fractions such as 3/4 plus 1/3. Faculty members said incompetent students had been slipping through (the college) and going on to teach in the city's public schools for 10 years.
>
> Something must be done now before children are made mental cripples. (The) Superintendent is considering a requirement to have new teachers pass a test of academic skills.... He should. The time to put it into effect is in 1980, when the system hopes to begin citywide testing of students before promotions from grades 3, 6 and 9.
>
> It is no less important to begin testing senior teachers.... Testing of old teachers as well as new ones, is the way for the school system to get to the heart of its academic woes.[2]

To the surprise of some, an early advocate of tests at least for entering teachers has been American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Albert Shanker, who has said, "In our state, you have to take an examination to become a lawyer, and to get a driver's license, and to sell insurance." Exempting teachers from such a requirement is a "form of de-professionalization."[3] AFT support for testing teachers does not, however, extend to veteran teachers.

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[1] Legislative Review, Vol. 10, No. 2, February 10, 1980, p. 2.

[2] Civille Right, An editorial in The Washington Post, Friday, Sept. 28, 1979.

[3] Education U.S.A., November 12, 1979, p. 85.

Mr. Shanker has gone on record as opposing standards and tests of competency for teachers on-the-job as follows:

> Many states and local school districts have welcomed the current focus on accountability because it gives them grounds for criticizing or even firing teachers--particularly the more expensive ones. Since there is no research to tell us which competencies are valid, the selection of which competencies are to be required could change from year to year, depending on the political wishes and financial circumstances of the states and local school boards. What all of this ignores is the complexity of factors that contribute to student growth. It also ignores the need for teaching to be viewed as a process involving abilities of diagnosis, analysis and understanding, as well as the performance of isolated skills.

And Mary Bergen of the California Federation of Teachers has argued similarly that in the case of challenges to the competency of practicing teachers, "Incompetence really is not usually the issue. The issue usually is a person who rocked the boat."[4]

The National Education Association (NEA) has also opposed testing existing teachers. John Sullivan, NEA's director of Instruction and Professional Development, made this clear when he said, "There is no test conceived that would be helpful in determining whether teachers should continue to teach." Sullivan has also allowed, however, that it might be acceptable to use short essay tests (but not standardized tests) to screen out those teacher candidates least competent in language usage skills.[5]

Robert Cole, speaking recently from the editor's page of a recent Phi Delta Kappan, eloquently rejected minimum competency testing for both prospective and practicing teachers when he said:

> Minimum competency testing is a hollow means of judging the efficacy of teachers. It can only whittle away at the edges of the problem; it has no power to cure, because it treats symptoms rather than causes. The heart of the problem perceived by the public lies deep within the structure of the education system.... Competency testing is nothing more than a search for victims off on a wrong scent. The time for

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[4] Staff Dismissal: Problems and Solutions. American School Boards Association, Arlington, VA. 1978, p. 11.

[5] Levin, Dan. You might be able to test teacher applicants but no board has ever been able to test working teachers. American School Board Journal, March 1979, pp. 35-37.

> assurance of competence is at the beginning of the (teacher) educative process, not simply as a belated quality check at the end. It is within our power as a professional community, for example, to redesign teacher training in a way that takes advantage of valuable research findings. It is within our power to change traditional reward systems so as to attract a higher quality of teachers. Rational planning based on solid research and clear goals can effect constructive change. Hastily conceived tests of minimum competence will only add to existing confusion.[6]

As is demonstrated by the preceding quotations, there is heartfelt disagreement and debate within the American education community over whether tests are a worthwhile and even necessary means of ensuring teacher competency. This paper attempts to foster this critical discussion by first presenting a brief review of current state and local efforts to test teacher competency in order that the debate over the seriousness of the problem of teacher incompetence and the merit of tests as a means of dealing with it can be enlightened by the experience of the movement's pioneers.

Secondly, the case commonly made for testing teachers will be drawn. As part of this discussion, the available evidence on the level of incompetence within the nation's teaching force will be reviewed and discussed in an attempt to determine whether we are indeed faced with a serious educational problem.

Thirdly, some limitations of testing teachers to ensure competency will be presented. In the course of this discussion some of the critical issues that those considering using tests for teachers must deal with will be raised. These include such questions as what teacher competencies should and can be measured, and what legal constraints must be taken into consideration.

Finally some conclusions on the appropriate role that testing can take in a comprehensive effort to ensure competency of teachers will be offered.

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[6] Cole, Robert W., Jr. Minimum Competency Tests for Teachers: Confusion Compounded. Phi Delta Kappan, December 1979, p. 233.

STATE AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES WITH TESTING TEACHERS

Proposals for when to test teachers in order to assure their competency have ranged from the point of selection of candidates applying to and graduating from teacher training institutions to on-the-job evaluation of experienced teachers. The current movement has, however, focused most intensely on teacher certification at the state level, and in local districts, on screening applicants for teaching positions. There has also been some emphasis at the local level on use of tests to identify weaknesses of probationary or even experienced teachers for purposes of remediation or dismissal. This review, accordingly, will focus upon these main arenas.

State Teacher Testing Programs

Russ Vlaanderen, Director of the Research and Information Department for the Education Commission of the States, has been quoted as saying of state efforts to test teachers, "This could turn into a bandwagon...(It) is the new, hot subject in education."[7] According to Vlaanderen, Florida got the state teacher competency testing movement rolling in June 1978 when the legislature passed a bill requiring the passing of a locally developed, comprehensive written examination as a prerequisite for certification to teach. It also required passage of a national normed college entrance exam before teacher training and a year long internship. Prior to this time three states had been using National Teacher Examination (NTE) results for teacher certification. These states were Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina.[8] The teacher testing movement gained momentum following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in January 1978 that South Carolina did not discriminate against blacks by using the National Teacher Examination to certify teachers even though the

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[7] Montgomery, Jim. Can 'Teach' Teach? New York Times, May 14, 1979.

[8] Vlaanderen, Russ. Trends in Competency Based Teacher Certification. Education Commission of the States, May 14, 1979, p. 1.

standards applied disqualified 83% of black applicants and only 17.5% of whites.

Louisiana was added to the roster of states using the NTE for certification when the state superintendent chose it as the means of meeting a legislative requirement that teachers pass a test as a condition of certification. And according to Vlaanderen West Virginia was using the NTE for certification by mid 1979. The State Board of Education in Tennessee has adopted the NTE for certification effective the end of this year.[9] Besides the six states now using the NTE for teacher certification, the Alabama legislature is planning to require it too, if the State Board does not develop its own competency test.

The other state besides Florida that already has developed its own certification test is Georgia. North Carolina is working on a locally developed testing program to supplement the NTE. Arkansas has passed legislation directing the State Board to write regulations for teacher certification that would include competency testing, perhaps by the NTE. Virginia has an amendment passed and signed that directs the State Board to require that teachers seeking certification after July 1, 1980 take an examination. Iowa and Oklahoma have just passed bills requiring that their teachers pass a competency test. Arizona and Wisconsin are still considering legislation requiring teacher certification tests. The New York Board of Regents is also continuing to look into tests for teachers. Thus, the final count shows a total of thirteen states requiring competency tests of teachers, at least as a condition of certification, and three other states actively considering the adoption of such a program. Applicant failure rates on the various forms of state examinations have ranged from 20% in Georgia to 47% in Louisiana.

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[9] Northeren, E. F. The Trend Toward Competency Testing of Teachers. Phi Delta Kappan, January 1980, p. 359.

Local District Teacher Testing Programs

In Pinellas County, Florida Tom Tocco (1980) and his colleagues have been testing teacher applicants since August 1976. They use below criterion score performance on tests as a sufficent reason to disqualify teacher applicants from further consideration. Approximately 30% of the applicants fail the test when it is first given each year. A self instructional program has been made available to those who fail the test on the first attempt, and most recently about half of those who failed initially are passing on the second or third try. There is evidence here, as elsewhere, that the mere existence of the test may cause candidates with dubious qualifications not to even apply.

The experience of Freda Holley (1980) and the Austin, Texas School District is discussed elsewhere in this paper. Briefly, their experience has been that after an experiment in testing teachers, the district discarded the practice in favor of a more rigorous competency based teacher evaluation system because of difficulties encountered or foreseen with the testing effort in areas such as validity, cost effectiveness and recruiting efforts.

In the Dallas School District, Bill Webster (1980) and his colleagues gave the Wesman Personnel Classification Test (WPCT) of verbal and quantitative ability as part of a teacher selection system validation study. They also gathered data on eight standard teacher selection criteria (such as quality of the application, college grades, references, interviews, results) and two other quantitative criteria; namely, the score on a pair of essays, and the rating on a formal set of interview protocols. All eleven measures, but especially the three quantitative ones, were to be related to quality of instruction as measured by a classroom observation

rating scale and student gain scores on nationally normed standardized tests. Correlations of the WPCT with the NTE were done in order to get a concurrent measure of the WPCT's validity. This carefully designed study became somewhat notorious when the press demanded and received the results of the sub-study done to norm the WPCT on the existing Dallas teaching population.

Like Pinellas County, the Torrington, Connecticut school system has been testing prospective teachers since 1976. In order to be hired this year's applicants must take and pass an essay of 200 to 500 words on an educational topic, a 100 word spelling test, and a 20 sentence grammar test. The essays are graded for meaning and imagination, as well as for grammar, spelling and punctuation. The scores on this battery of tests are used as one of many factors in making hiring decisions.

The Mobile, Alabama School District recently adopted a requirement that all teacher applicants pass the NTE. It also revised its teacher evaluation system to include a requirement that any teacher found making grammatical errors would have to submit an essay to the superintendent for evaluation. When it further attempted to require that all current teachers take the NTE, the board backed down under pressure from the teachers.

In the Prince Georges County, Maryland School District there was careful involvement of the teachers union in the effort to keep incompetents out of the classroom. The result was pre-employment tests beginning in June 1975 in the areas of spelling and grammar. A mathematics test was added in 1977. The tests have screened out approximately 20% of the applicants.

In Emporia, Kansas the school board has started to implement a new program requiring each teacher applicant who reaches the interview stage to demonstrate english proficiency by writing a 250-word letter to a parent on the subject selected from among six that are offered. The test takes an hour and is graded 10% on content and 90% on mechanics.

In Montgomery County, Maryland prospective english teachers must obtain a score of at least 80 on a test designed for college students. In Richmond, Virginia all elementary teachers were required to pass a course in reading before they could get their pay increases. And New York City and Buffalo use the NTE in hiring teachers for schools having large numbers of children with reading problems. Chicago also has had a teacher testing program.

Closer to home, the Salem, Oregon school system has reaped considerable political capital with their local community and much favorable attention among citizens statewide by requiring teacher candidates to get at least 23 out of 44 items correct on a locally developed test of competence in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word usage, sentence construction, and the ability to detect student errors in composition. All candidates are required to be present at the district for testing. This testing program eliminates about 5% of the candidates from further consideration when their scores fall below criterion level. As with Pinellas County, there is evidence in Salem that the existence of the test as part of the hiring procedure is causing some candidates who doubt their ability to pass the district test to apply elsewhere. It is to be expected that other local districts besides those cited above are engaging in testing their teacher candidates. I hope that those involved will share their experience with me so I can refer to it in the future. Otherwise, it is difficult to garner such information.

The lessons learned from this review of state and local experience with testing teachers to ensure competency are drawn in the following sections on merits, limitations, issues and conclusions. It should be noted, however, that as with the student competency movement, state and local school systems are moving rapidly ahead with policies and procedures to implement teacher testing systems largely without the benefit of any carefully designed and researched experimental pilot program, or even any systematic evaluation of the efforts of the natural variations that are occurring.

THE CASE FOR TESTING TEACHERS

The case commonly made for testing teachers to ensure their competency goes as follows. Public pressure and political initiatives to test teachers are responses to increasing evidence that there are significant numbers of incompetents among our children's teachers. These incompetents are there because at least some of those attracted to the teaching profession and to schools of education are of low or marginal ability. The standards for gaining admission to and graduation from teacher preparation institutions are too low or too poorly applied to weed out these incompetents. Current state certification and district selection processes also sometimes fail to identify the incompetents and keep them out of the classroom. Finally, current teacher evaluation procedures seem to lack the ability or the will to identify incompetent teachers and remove them from the classroom, even during their probationary period and certainly not once they have attained tenure. Tests, with their clarity, objectivity and externality of control, are the only means to cut into this cycle of failure and so ensure acceptable levels of teaching competency. In the sections that follow each point in this line of reasoning will be discussed.

Public Pressure and Political Response

The scope and momentum of the public pressure to rid the schools of incompetent teachers was indicated by this year's annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. In response to a question on what the schools have to do to earn the public's respect, more respondents said, "Improve the quality of teaching" than anything else, even for the first time more than said, "Improve discipline." And 85% of those citizens polled said teachers should be required to pass a state examination in the subjects they teach.

State legislators seem generally willing to respond strongly to the concern of their constituents over the quality of teaching, much as they did in the case of student competency. At a recent national invitational seminar of the Advanced Leadership Program Services, 63 legislators from 38 states reacted to citizen concern over the quality of teaching by identifying "competency of teachers" as one of their top five educational priorities, along with adequacy of funding, accountability, equity of state aid allocations, and special education.[10] Such measures of public opinion and political concern are persuasive indicators of widespread public belief that there are significant numbers of incompetent teachers and an eagerness to do something about it in view of the apparent failure of the existing teacher preparation, certification, selection and evaluation systems to do the job. The validity of the belief that there is a pervasive lack of competence among teachers is examined in the next section.

Evidence of Teacher Incompetence

It is little wonder that legislators, school boards and communities, as they become increasingly concerned with the basic skills achievement of their children, are also becoming alarmed at what they see as growing evidence of incompetence among teachers. Frequently cited evidence of incompetence includes such things as poorly written notes home, ungrammatical classroom assignments and miscorrected student assignments. It is difficult to tell for certain how prevalent such occurrences are and to what extent they are valid indictments of the level of competence among the more than two million teachers in our nation. Nationwide evidence relevant to the question of the extent of teacher incompetence was, however, provided by a survey conducted

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[10] Legislative Review, Ibid.

in 1977 by the American School Boards Association (ASBA). This survey found that:

> One half of the districts responding to the survey (862 of 1,728 respondents) said that they had dismissed staff for reasons of "incompetence" during (the prior) three year period, through either an outright firing or the securing of a resignation after charges were filed.[11]

The number of teachers dismissed according to the survey's respondents were 684 in 1974-75, 766 in 1975-76, and 847 in 1976-77. The survey report further concluded that:

> On the basis of this 11 percent sampling of the nation's school districts, it can be estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 teachers are dismissed annually because they are not up to or in some way do not meet district standards. That equals one-quarter to one-half percent of the nation's 2.1 million teachers.

It is, of course, likely that the less than one percent of the nation's teachers who are actually dismissed for incompetence represents only the "tip of the iceberg" of incompetent teachers. Indeed, in the same report it was disclosed that "Superintendents and personnel directors estimated that from 5 to 15 percent of the teachers do not give adequate job performance." If this estimate is even approximately correct there does seem to be a serious educational problem. The need for some feasible and effective remedy for the current level of incompetence within the teaching force seems clear whether it is applied to teacher preparation, certification, selection or evaluation. The problems currently faced at each of these stages along a teacher's path to the classroom are discussed in the following section.

Teacher Preparation, Certification, Selection and Evaluation

The level of academic talent among those seeking and gaining admission to schools of education is lower than for any other field of study and is steadily decreasing as the more able potential applicants move to greener

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[11] Staff Dismissal: Problems and Solutions. op. cit., pp. 7-10.

fields. The Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores of college-bound high school seniors who planned to major in education in 1976 were below average by 34 points in the verbal area and 43 points in math. Out of 19 fields of study reported by the American College Testing Program (ACT) for enrolled college freshmen in 1975-76, education majors tied for seventeenth place in math and fourteenth place in english. Both SAT and ACT results show more rapid declines for those studying education than for other fields, especially math. Among 1976 graduating college seniors in the National Longitudinal Study, education majors ranked fourteenth out of 16 fields on SAT verbal scores. Only office-clerical and vocational-technical graduates were lower (Weaver, 1979). Thus, the evidence for the low and declining basic skills competence of those gaining admittance to colleges of education is unquestionable.

There also seems to be a quickening and justified decline in confidence in the ability of schools of education to turn those whom they admit into qualified teachers and to withhold diplomas from substandard candidates for a teaching degree. The Graduate Record Exam verbal and nonverbal test scores among education majors have declined significantly since 1970. Scores of teacher majors were substantially lower than scores of majors in eight other professional fields compared in 1975-76. And teacher scores have fallen at a faster rate than over all GRE scores since 1970 (Weaver, 1979). Thus, there is little doubt that graduation from a teaching preparation program is no automatic guarantee of a potential teacher's basic skills competency or general competency to teach.

Finally, state teacher certification procedures have been largely based upon the mere possession of a diploma from a teacher preparation institution. Such a procedure has, of course, done little to help screen out any who have passed through the teacher preparation system without at least minimal levels

of the skills necessary for successful teaching. Thus, in summary, there does seem to be evidence that the average ability of those entering teacher preparation institutions is on the decline and that at least some teacher candidates have received diplomas without having gained or been asked to demonstrate even minimal levels of basic skills and teaching competency. Up until recently, in most states, mere possession of a teaching diploma was in fact a passport to state certification as a teacher. As a result, the competent, marginally competent and incompetent products of the teacher preparation and certification systems have all shown up at the school district personnel office door with the same diploma, indistinguishable transcripts due to grade inflation, largely glowing and unhelpful recommendations, and a state certificate to teach; leaving the problem of protecting students from incompetent teachers up to the school district teacher selection and evaluation processes.

Efforts by school district personnel and evaluation offices to screen out those teachers lacking competency do not seem to have been completely successful either. The selection process is hindered by the poverty and subjectivity of the information currently available on candidates and a frequent lack of clarity of goals and standards for employment. Effective selection is also impeded by lack of time and personnel since personnel management and evaluation are two of those "unnecessary" educational administrative jobs that the public increasingly views as superfluous at budget time.

The burden for evaluating teachers during their probationary period and beyond commonly falls largely on the principal who may be unable or unwilling to recognize and deal with teaching incompetence. The "I'm OK, you're OK" ethic does not support outright challenges to another professional's competence, especially when it probably means the end of a career

in which at least five years and tens of thousands of dollars have been invested. Finally, a maze of contract provisions, state and local regulations and legal considerations render the effort to dismiss an incompetent teacher, once hired, a very difficult task.

Summary

Those who are supporting tests for teachers to ensure competency seem to have two strong points in their favor. First, it does seem that there are, in fact, significant numbers of incompetent teachers as the ASBA survey indicated. Secondly, current teacher preparation, certification, selection and evaluation procedures have not been successful in solving the problem, and indeed seem destined to worsen rather than to improve the situation unless there is a major effort at reform. In the next section limitations of testing teachers as a means of solving the problem of teacher incompetence and issues that need to be addressed in considering testing teachers will be discussed.

LIMITATIONS AND ISSUES

What to Test?

The experience of the Austin School District with testing teachers encapsulates the problems and concerns that those embarking on such an effort must be prepared to overcome. Austin tried testing a segment of their teachers as part of a board directed exploration of tests for both teacher candidates and practicing teachers. The district finally decided not to use such tests because of the small fraction of teacher competencies that could be adequately measured by tests, the large cost of developing valid and legally defensible measures, and the threatened negative impact on district recruitment and hiring efforts. Instead of tests, therefore,

Austin developed a more rigorous and formal competency-based evaluation system (Holley, 1980). Other school districts, such as Salt Lake City, who have carefully considered testing teachers, have chosen a course of action similar to Austin's.

The basic problems with testing teachers to ensure their competency as suggested by the experience of those who have tried it and by the reflections of a number of researchers and commentators on the subject, are as follows. First, there is no set of teacher competencies that have been empirically validated by research as essential for effective learning to take place. This point was made earlier by Albert Shanker of the AFT. Del Schalock makes the same point at the end of his exhaustive review of the literature on Teacher Selection Research when he says, "We do not have empirically validated criteria that can be used to effectively predict success in teaching, especially if success is to include the demonstrated ability to foster desired learning outcomes in children."[12]

How to Test?

Let us assume for the moment that a state or district, ignoring the demands of an absolutely rigorous empiricism, and attending to the desire of its community, proceeds to identify a comprehensive set of the competencies it believes are essential for effective teaching and learning. Such a list would be likely to include competencies in such areas as expertise in basic skills and in other subjects to be taught, instructional skills, classroom management skills, interpersonal skills and personal qualities. After a lengthy process that included attention to the relevant research, Austin, for example, came up with a list of 63 competencies that span the area listed above. The problem now becomes one

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[12] Schalock, Del. Research on Teacher Selection. Prepublication draft of a chapter to appear in the 7th Annual Review of Research in Education. David Berliner, editor, 1980, p. 72.

of valid and cost effective assessment for such a set of competencies. David Seeley recently summarized this second basic limitation on testing teachers to ensure competency when he said:

> The main problem is that no one has come up with a test that can predict who will make a good teacher--or a good principal, for that matter. No one would be happier than I if one could be found; it would make life much simpler. But at the moment, the most that tests can be expected to do is screen out those whose general educational background is too weak, or those teachers who don't know their subject matter well enough to teach it. Once you get beyond these minimal uses of tests, there is no escape from the need for human judgment followed by very careful monitoring of performance.[13]

The explanation of the meaning that respondents to the ASBA survey cited earlier were giving to the term "incompetence" suggests, however, that if we take Seeley's advice, as some have, and limit our tests of teacher competency to subject matter examinations, we may not put ourselves in a position to do anything about the problem of incompetence as it really exists. That explanation went as follows:

> One superintendent thinks that (incompetent teachers) divide into two groups: "Those who don't have it" (who lack teaching skills) and "those who don't use it" (who are able, but don't give adequate effort).
>
> Others generally grouped incompetent teachers into these categories:
>
> New teachers who lack the temperament, patience and compatibility both to get along with young people and to plan effective teaching. Also included in this category are some new teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach, who lack basic skills and who are, in the words of one educator, "real lulus."
>
> Mass hirees who were employed during the periods when teachers were in short supply. "Now," said one Texas superintendent, "we face the problem of removing some of them to make room for some of the highly skilled practitioners coming out of colleges."
>
> The emotionally troubled, whose problems may be rooted in home or professional areas.

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13 Seeley, David S. Reducing the Confrontation over Teacher Accountability. Phi Delta Kappan, December 1979, pp. 248-251.

> Veterans who cannot keep up--who may be experiencing a late career slump or who have lost their drive, interest and adaptability or who have trouble handling newer instructional programs or different student bodies.[14]

The same report notes that legal judgments of teacher incompetence have been based upon such things as insubordination, unpatriotism, poor health, lack of self control, poor student learning, negligence and absenteeism. It is obvious that the problem of "incompetence" among teachers is too broad to be adequately dealt by attempting to hold them to the "minimal knowledge of basic skills" criterion that is commonly discussed by proponents of testing to ensure teacher competency. The scope of the real problem even far exceeds the horizons of the few who wish to include classroom management and instructional skills in their teacher testing program.

Del Schalock, in his excellent indepth review of research on teacher selection cited earlier, made the additional devastating point that even if we limit our targets for teacher competency testing to knowledge of basic skills, other subject matter and the principles and procedures of teaching, and even if we use a measure carefully developed by one of our major education testing institutions, we still have no guarantee of improving teaching. He observed, after a comprehensive review of relevant studies, that "Without exception, ... scores derived through the National Teacher Examination and performance as a teacher ... (were) found to be unrelated."[15]

Legal Issues

A final set of issues that need to be carefully addressed by those embarking on teacher competency testing programs are the legal ones. The major issues here are the following: First, aside from having to comply

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[14] Staff Dismissal: Problems and Solutions. op. cit., p. 10.

[15] Schalock, Del. op. cit., p. 21.

with all state and local laws, regulations, and contracts, it is also necessary to comply with federal constitutional requirements. In order to comply with the due process clause of the fourteenth amendment, any written examination used in selecting, certifying or evaluating teachers must be directly related to the job of teaching. In view of the previously cited poverty of empirical evidence on the predictive validity of supposed essential teacher competencies this could be difficult to prove. Robert Thorndike was cited by Paul Tractenberg (1973), however, as being of the opinion that a demonstration of content validity would most likely be sufficient to survive legal challenge on due process grounds.

A potentially even more troublesome legal issue is that in order to comply with the equal protection of the Constitution and the provisions of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, a test must not discriminate either directly or indirectly on the basis of race, religion, national origin or sex. Title VII of that act is a possible basis for legal actions against teacher competency tests used in selection processes, according to Tractenberg, since:

> Under this statute, a requirement for employment which has the effect of excluding racial minorities is legal only if it is necessary for performance on the job. Where written tests are involved, the courts give considerable weight to guidelines developed by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). These guidelines specify acceptable methods by which employers can validate tests...
>
> Once the plaintiffs have proved that tests have the effect of disproportionately screening out minority applicants, the defendant has the burden of justifying its use of the tests. However, where plaintiffs have shown a racially disproportionate effect from use of a test, the defendants have virtually always failed to justify their reliance on test scores. In order to do so, they must prove that the tests have "validity." Although the EEOC guidelines seem to require predictive validity, they have not been applied rigorously by the agency itself, nor by

> the courts. In most instances...the tests in question have been found lacking even in content validity. In other cases the defendants used the tests improperly.[16]

All I can add to Tractenberg's excellent summary is the observation that in the absence of a body of research establishing the validity of tests of teacher competency, those seeking to put such programs into effect must do their own careful validation studies in accord with the EEOC guidelines or be prepared to suffer the legal consequences.

CONCLUSION

Is testing teachers to insure minimally acceptable levels of the basic skills and perhaps of instructional skills the answer to the creation of optimal learning environments and comprehensive improvement in student learning, growth and performance? The answer is, of course, "In isolation, no." Rather it is only a bandaid on a symptom of a major failure of American education, not a guarantee of its success. We cannot, however, afford to sit idly by arguing as some do that the level of incompetence among teachers is no worse than in other professions. An aroused public will not permit it even if our consciences would.

While testing teachers for basic skills competence is not the whole answer to the problem of the quality of teaching, as part of a comprehensive program to apply what careful evaluation and research have already taught us will lead to better schooling, it can be part of the solution. If it is linked with concentrated efforts to attract the best and most creative people to the teaching profession through improved financing and support of the teaching-learning enterprise; if it is part of a nationwide effort on the part of teacher preparation institutions to carefully screen those who come to their

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[16] Tractenberg, Paul L. Legal Issues in the Testing of School Personnel. Phi Delta Kappan, May 1976, p. 603.

doors and then prepare those truly called to teaching with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for caring, professional, creative teaching; if it is supported by a concentrated effort on the part of state departments to guarantee that a certificate to teach is granted only to the truly qualified; if it is part of an informed effort by school districts to select, evaluate and support the growth of their teachers in order that they may continue to meet lofty and scientifically proven standards of the teaching profession; if it is developed in collaboration with the teachers themselves and those who represent them; if it is integrated with similar efforts to improve the competence of all administrative and support personnel; if it is backed by constant efforts to honor the responsibilities of students, parents and citizens as partners in the teaching-learning enterprise; if it is allowed to affect teachers and their careers, only after careful and prolonged experimentation, evaluation, validation and legal review; and if, finally, it is borne upward and forward by an ongoing nationwide program of intensive research and evaluation to insure its efficacy and continuous improvement; then, yes, and only then will testing teachers to ensure their competency make a worthwhile contribution to the attainment of our common commitment to excellence in American education.

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